

Donor–NGO partnerships in South Africa: A qualitative case study of five NGOs in Gauteng



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Dates:

Received: 15 Feb. 2022
Accepted: 19 Sept. 2022
Published: 27 Oct. 2022

How to cite this article:

Mpofo, L. & Govender, K., 2022, 'Donor–NGO partnerships in South Africa: A qualitative case study of five NGOs in Gauteng', *African Evaluation Journal* 10(1), a619. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aej.v10i1.619>

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Background: Donor–nongovernmental organisation (NGO) partnerships may enable earlier infusion of implementation science principles into developing evidence-based interventions. Yet, donors and NGOs often report difficulty leveraging resources, personnel and expertise to create beneficial outcomes for all. Drawing from a PhD thesis, the authors report how the asymmetrical nature of the relationships manifests in practice in the work of NGOs. The study focused on human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV and AIDS) NGOs in Gauteng province in South Africa.

Objectives: This study examines whether the asymmetrical relationships can be termed partnerships and highlights the potential for such a discourse to reinforce existing relationship inequalities.

Method: Qualitative data were collected through in-depth individual interviews with key informants from five purposively selected HIV and AIDS NGOs. A total of 28 interviews were analysed deductively using thematic analysis. The Dóchas Partnership Assessment and Development Process framework guided this analysis. The NGOs under study have implemented various HIV and AIDS programmes and policies in their workspace.

Results: The findings have revealed that 'partnership' is a false representation of the actual relationships between donors and NGOs.

Conclusion: The study concluded that although the notion of partnerships accurately describes the intention of 'donors' and 'NGOs' to collaborate in ways that ensure improved services and outcomes, the unintended consequences of how partnerships are managed and run inhibit that common agenda. The article concludes with suggestions to build and sustain effective working relationships between partners.

Contribution: Assessing how donor-NGO partnerships are operationalised can assist in determining the extent to which their relationship is operating and point to areas where partnerships practice can be further developed.

Keywords: partnership; collaboration; relationships; donors; non-governmental organisations; accountability mechanisms; accountability.

Introduction

Drawing upon the author's PhD thesis, this article asks whether the global rhetoric of 'Donor–NGO partnerships' reflects the actual nature of the relationships between donors and the nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) they support. Specifically, this study examines the experiences of five South African NGOs in managing their relationships with their respective donors. Relationships go hand-in-hand with accountability. So, accountability is a social relationship in which an NGO is 'obligated to explain and justify its conduct to donors and beneficiaries' (Hupe & Hill 2007:286). In such contexts, accountability would focus on the actual performance of these NGOs, such as the NGOs' accountability practices, their accountability mechanisms, such as preparing financial reports and financial systems, evaluations and impact assessments, site visits, quarterly meetings (participation), external audits (reports), dissemination of information, sharing of mistakes or failure (adaptive learning), negotiation capacity and training (self-regulation) among others. To efficiently utilise resources, NGOs are to be accountable to their two main stakeholders: donors and beneficiaries. So, NGOs in this context operate at the community, national or international levels (Mercer & Green 2013), with most NGOs serving a specific population in a particular geographic area. These national

NGOs operate in the country where they have been established, while the international NGOs (INGOs) in this study have their head office in one country and work in one or more other states (Mercer & Green 2013).

On the other hand, donors provide finance for NGOs' operations. At the same time, beneficiaries involve people who are directly (clients) or indirectly (communities) that participate in and benefit from NGOs' projects (Mpofu 2019). This study uses the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations (Dóchas) Partnership Assessment and Development Process framework to examine whether the asymmetrical relationships can be termed partnerships and highlights the potential for such a discourse to reinforce existing power inequalities. The NGOs under study provide HIV and AIDS services in the Gauteng province in a context where the national human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV and AIDS) programme depends very much on NGOs to deliver social, economic and medical assistance to people living with HIV (PLHIV).

Today's ethos is for donors and NGOs to collaborate (rather than for NGOs to follow the dictates of their donors) in designing and monitoring (and over time adapting and modifying as necessary) interventions to improve services provided and outcomes for recipients. Extant research on partnerships and collaboration between donors and NGOs has focused on various challenges and problems in collaboration. Several authors, Poret (2019), Sapat, Esnard and Kolpakov (2019) and Wagner and Thakur-Weigold (2018), have noted the need for organisations to communicate their plans and actions adequately and quickly. These researchers have noted how the flow of information among donors and NGOs can hinder collaboration, mainly while providing services for HIV and AIDS.

Background

Non-governmental organisations are subject to an overabundance of accountability mechanisms (Mpofu 2019). The author posits that, the duplication, overlap or potential collaborations that come with those accountability mechanisms overwhelm these NGOs. More still, there are informal mechanisms that are operationalised in various ways depending on the managerial approach and local context in which accountability is exercised.

Various researchers have indicated that many donors have moved from implementing development projects towards a partnership approach in which they fund and attempt to work with local NGOs (Mpofu 2019; Bano 2019; Brass et al. 2018; Kumi, & Copestake 2021; Sapat et al. 2019; Uddin & Belal 2019). This has increasingly led to a collaboration driven by a shared problem with partners aiming for long-term sustainable partnerships to address the issue. Approaches to such a relationship include collaborative betterment, where one partner invites a similar partner that shares the same ideal for collaboration, and collective empowerment, which involves

assigning partnership-specific activities for implementation by both parties (Aniekwe, Hayman & Toner 2012).

A critical feature of such relationships is the donor imperative for accountability on the part of NGOs with regard to the use of donor's funds for purposes they were given and achieving the desired aims of projects in the form of clear benefits for the recipients of the projects. Non-governmental organisations pursuing donor funding face many challenges reinforcing the power imbalance (Reith 2010). According to Sally Reith, the term 'partnership' disguises the reality of the complex relationships in imbalances of power and inequality, often expressed through the control of one 'partner' over the other (Reith 2010). Donors need to react quickly and efficiently, raising the importance of establishing relationships with local NGOs. A partnership between donors and NGOs is chosen in the hope that a networked arrangement will be more effective in tackling the accountability mechanisms (Mpofu 2019).

Partnerships are a valuable tool to expand the coverage of development interventions, increase the impact of projects and foster the sustainability of NGO services (Altahir 2013). Partnerships can also be a conduit for transferring the management and oversight of development programmes from INGOs to community-based organisations (Altahir 2013).

Non-governmental organisations and donors need to communicate their plans and actions adequately and quickly among themselves because a healthy communication style can make it easier to deal with conflict and build a more robust and beneficial partnership (Mpofu 2019). This acceleration of communication between distant strangers has facilitated partnerships between developmental NGOs and donors. Collaboration among NGOs and donors is vital in helping both parties deliver services, share information and avoid resource duplication among donors and NGOs. In their collaboration, donors sought to control costs and increase governability in the NGOs (Dubnick & Frederickson 2011). According to the Mpofu (2019), ethical issues for NGOs' and 'donors' arise from their management and uneven accountability. Problems emanating from this inconsistent accountability include adverse outcomes of the audit culture, transparency and legitimation for donors and NGOs.

Donor-NGO tensions and the inability to provide information flow among themselves can hinder collaboration, mainly while providing services (Reith 2010). Resource allocation and redistribution can negatively impact service delivery, economic opportunity, welfare and legitimacy. Accountability measures can create tensions between NGOs and donors, diminishing agreed-on forms and degrees of service delivery. Non-governmental organisations and donors have mainly focused on short-term functional accountability, which concerns operational activities, for example, at the expense of 'strategic' accountability. Strategic accountability is the longer-term intentions of both donors and NGOs to principles and practices including gender equality and entrenchment

of democracy. Strategic accountabilities try to improve institutional performance by reinforcing both NGO engagement and the public responsiveness of the NGOs (Mpofu 2019; Fox 2015; Gaventa & McGee 2013). Similarly, the researchers (Ali, Elham & Alauddin 2014; Burger & Owens 2010; O'Dwyer & Unerman 2010; Van Alstine et al. 2014) have highlighted 'NGOs' lack of accountability practices and mechanisms regarding their responsibilities to beneficiaries, such as the mismanagement of funds meant for the recipients as critical challenges. Effective accountability requires clear goals, transparency in decision-making, and reporting through concrete mechanisms to hold NGOs accountable and enhance their practices (Ebrahim 2009; Jordan 2011; Romzek 2011). The resource providers have every right to demand accountability for efficiently utilising the stated goals. Trust and the lack of it, along with expected norms, have also been identified as essential factors affecting collaboration and partnership in donor-NGO relationships (Nolte & Boenigk 2011, 2013; Robinson 2012; Sapat et al. 2019).

Non-governmental organisations have had to recognise the need to carefully consider their 'donors' interests, priorities and formal requirements to address community needs and create partnerships to foster democratic development and economic growth. 'Nonetheless, the competitive effect of the NGO sector to collaborate successfully with donors raises questions about the actual nature of donor-NGO partnerships. Despite intentions, inadvertent consequences of the fundamental nature and form of the relationships inhibit the achievement of donors' and NGOs' partnerships because donors have more influence over the nature of the partnership than NGOs have (Mpofu 2019; Bano 2019; Brass et al. 2018; Kumi & Copestake 2021; Sapat et al. 2019; Uddin & Belal 2019).

Research methodology

Design

A qualitative research methodology was used to examine the experiences of five South African NGOs in managing their relationships with their respective donors. Qualitative research was based on a deeper understanding and critical insights into the dynamics of the social relations existing in HIV and AIDS NGOs in South Africa. This article is a by-product of broader doctoral research (see Mpofu 2019).

Setting

Interviews were conducted at the HIV and AIDS NGOs (the participant's place of work). This enabled the participant to open up during the discussion as they were familiar with the environment (Sell et al. 2015). South African HIV and AIDS NGOs were chosen as a case study for examining the partnership relations between NGOs and the donors because of the scale of the HIV pandemic in South Africa, which has remained vast. South Africa has the largest HIV epidemic in the world, with 19% of the global number of PLHIV, 15% of new infections and 11% of AIDS-related deaths (UNAIDS 2018). With a high HIV epidemic, South Africa's sub-

populations are at a higher risk of being HIV infected or transmitting HIV, even though the disease burden is not the same in all areas (Mpofu 2019). Such a high HIV pandemic requires significant donor funding. Therefore, in doing so, representatives of HIV and AIDS NGOs need to implement their HIV and AIDS projects with the donors and beneficiaries' requirements in mind, so understanding how social relations help or hinder enacting these HIV and AIDS projects between the donors and NGO representatives is crucial to fulfilling their shared purpose of serving the beneficiaries.

Sampling and sample

The selection of the HIV and AIDS NGOs was informed by the following criteria. Firstly, they needed to be mainly concerned with ensuring community-level provision of HIV and AIDS health services. Secondly, they are structured and undertake a broader range of activities – (a range of HIV health services) across substantial and varied geographic areas. Thirdly, they have been established for more than 10 years. Fourthly, they rely on support from donors and belong to NGO coalitions, such as South Africa Civil Society Organisations in Health and The South African National AIDS Council (SANAC). Fifthly, they must be South African NGOs who operate nationally in South Africa and registered with the Department of Social Development (DSD), and comply with specific requirements relating to finance, internal controls, regulation and administration. Although they are local NGOs, they operate nationally, and some of them have head offices in one country and work in other countries.

Purposive sampling was used to select NGOs focusing on HIV and AIDS in the Gauteng province. Out of the six districts in (Gauteng Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality, Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, Metsweding District Municipality, Sedibeng District Municipality and West Rand District Municipality), at least four districts were selected with at least one NGO per municipality. The City of Johannesburg had two NGOs representation because it is the biggest city in Gauteng. Gauteng is one province with the most significant density of NGOs in South Africa.

The rationale for selecting Gauteng was further strengthened because Gauteng has the highest number of HIV and AIDS NGOs in South Africa. The researchers are NGO consultants and possess a more profound knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field.

Negotiation of research access started with a telephone call to suitable NGOs identified from the CharitySA website, considering the different municipalities in the Gauteng province. At first, it was unclear whether the NGOs would be willing to participate in the research. From the list of eight suitable NGOs, which indicated a willingness to help, the researchers narrowed down to five based on how quickly they responded. The university ethics committee also required gatekeeper letters from the NGOs that authorised



Source: Adapted from www.municipalities.co.za
 NGO, non-governmental organisation.

FIGURE 1: The map of Gauteng showing the municipalities from which the cases were drawn.

the researcher to interview their employees. Some gatekeeper letters arrived late after the researchers had submitted the five gatekeeper letters to the university ethics committee; hence, those that came late could not be part of the study. Figure 1 shows the diagrammatical representation of NGOs in the different municipalities of Gauteng that agreed to participate – one in the city of Tshwane (TS4) (Pretoria), one in Westrand (WR5) (Randfontein), one in Sedibeng (SD3) (Vereeniging), two in the City of Johannesburg – Braamfontein (JB1) and Johannesburg CBD (JC2).

After identifying the NGOs, every staff or board member in the NGO was contacted through email and asked whether they would be willing to participate. The criteria for choosing the NGO employee participants were as follows: they must have a good knowledge of and work extensively with local and international donors. They must have extensive experience working at the NGO–donor interface in collating and analysing data and submitting reports or liaison with donors. They also needed to have direct experience in agreeing to the terms of accountability to donors. They had been trained in accountability issues of their NGO, or they were directly involved with the HIV and AIDS programmes and were willing to participate in the research. A total of 28 NGO staff involving board members, executive directors, heads of programmes and project managers and/or officers were interviewed. Data saturation determined the sample size. The selected cases for the study are (hereafter referred to as JB1, JC2, SD3, TS4 and WR5).

Data collection

Semi-structured, individual face-to-face interviews, observation and review of documents were used to collect the study data. The researchers conducted the interviews between October 2017 and March 2018 in English. Data were collected from 28 NGO employees operating in the five selected HIV and

AIDS NGOs in South Africa. In-depth individual interviews provided much insight into their social relations developed through HIV and AIDS work engagement. The semi-structured interviews were made up of open-ended questions, allowing interviewees to express their opinions in detail. Probing questions were also used when appropriate to enhance the richness of the data. Field notes were employed to capture the ‘interviewees’ body language and facial expressions. Each interview lasted approximately 50 min. (1) The interviews were digitally recorded, (2) transcribed verbatim, (3) the transcripts were checked for quality by the two researchers and (4) the key findings were discussed within 24 h by the two researchers.

The researchers also reviewed some documents that the NGOs made available. These included flyers, brochures, annual reports and other publicly available documents on the internet. The researchers reviewed these NGO documents hoping that the exercise would provide useful information about donor–NGO–beneficiary partnerships, as discrepancies between theory and practice might be identified. The researchers considered the types of documents to be reviewed, and the time of publication and release of those documents, so that the exercise could be used as a ‘baseline’ to track changes and progress in theory and practice for their partnerships.

Data analysis

The thematic analysis method guided data analysis. We identified the aspects of the data, going through a relatively intense systematic time-consuming coding process, by identifying the patterns and categorising them into themes and looking beyond the kind of surface category to tell a story. In this instance, the themes are interpretative stories-rich and multifaceted patterns of shared meaning organised around a central concept or idea and created by the researchers through intense analytical engagement.

The data analysis followed Creswell’s six-step thematic analysis approach (Creswell & Creswell 2017). This approach includes (1) the researcher’s description of their own experience of the phenomenon; (2) the researchers develop a list of significant statements from the participants’ description; (3) grouping of the multiple reports into themes; (4) textural description of the experience and inclusion of verbatim examples; (5) structural description or the description of how the encounter happened and (6) writing of a composite report of the phenomenon incorporating the textural and structural stories.

Scientific rigour

The researchers applied strategies recommended by Creswell to achieve scientific rigour. The researchers first build rapport with the interviewees to freely relax and tell their stories. Participants were sceptical about the intent of asking questions relating to their relationships with donors even after elucidation that the research was for academic purposes. The participants opened up and reflected on their work

trajectory in interviews. The participants were given the guarantee of anonymity. This allowed them to share their negative and positive experiences of their relationships in their daily operations.

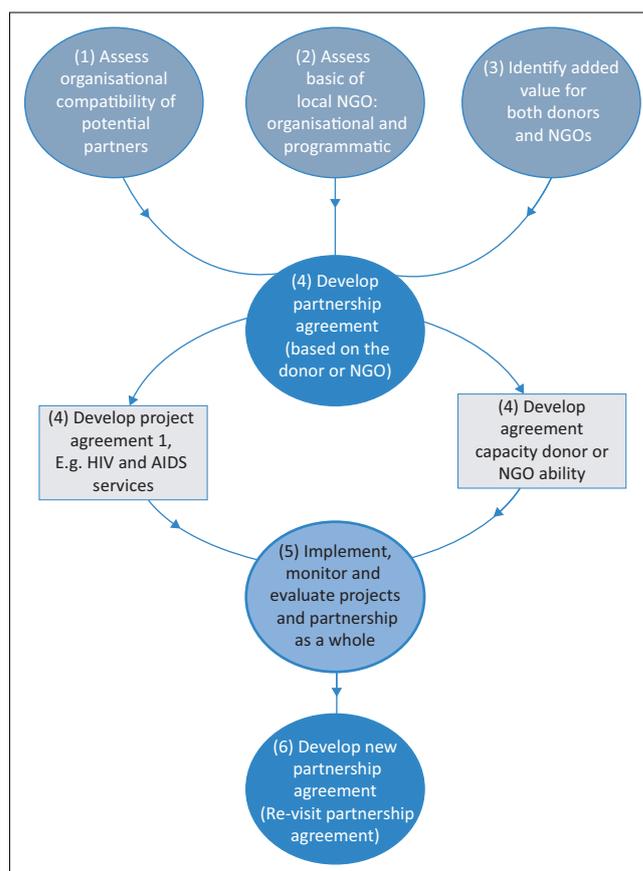
The researchers gave the independent coder raw data to double-check it to ensure dependability. The findings' final report was submitted to the independent coder to verify and confirm themes. To ensure credibility, the researchers used prolonged engagement, neutrality during interviews, member checking, the careful handling of emotional expressions and the reflexivity and triangulation of the data. The data from the participants' interviews were triangulated with the researchers' observation notes – which were documented during the fieldwork – and these notes were included as data in this analysis. As highlighted above, independent coding and peer evaluation were also used. Conformity was achieved by keeping an appropriate emotional distance between the researcher and participants to avoid influenced findings by being reflexive and self-conscious in terms of positioning ourselves as researchers. The researchers were both self-aware and researcher-self-aware and acknowledged the intertextuality that is a part of both the data gathering and writing processes (Greene 2014:9). Data were coded and recorded several times and compared with the themes identified by the researchers.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (reference number: HSS/1184/017D). The researcher maintained the privacy and confidentiality of the information shared by participants. All data sources were well protected; anonymity for the participants meant that their names would neither be used nor referred to during and after data collection. The researcher only used pseudonyms (codes) and maintained participants' privacy during data collection. The participants were recruited for voluntary participation in the study. The study identified participants who met the inclusion criteria from the five HIV and AIDS NGO cases. The participants were informed in advance that the interviews would be audio recorded. The participants' autonomy was respected. Before participating, the NGO employees were given information about the study in a private room at their NGO (place of work), and their role of participation was explained. Those who agreed to participate were given consent forms to sign to confirm their willingness to participate in the study.

The analytical framework

This article examines the experiences of five South African HIV and AIDS NGOs in managing relationships with their respective donors. The researchers used Williams' (2013) (Dóchas) Partnership Assessment and Development Process framework for analysis. The framework was chosen to emphasise the solid local ownership of programmes. It was also selected as it supports the capacity of local NGOs to collaborate for broader social change and is underpinned by



Source: Adapted from Williams, M., 2013:7, *Guidelines on Partnerships with Southern CSOs*, Dóchas, viewed 05 January 2022, from https://dochas.ie/sites/default/files/dochas-partnerships_0.pdf

FIGURE 2: The realities of 'Partnership' in the HIV and AIDS NGOs in South Africa.

a belief that NGOs are natural partners with their donor counterparts. Besides, partnerships are a valuable tool to expand the coverage of development interventions, increase the impact of projects and foster the sustainability of NGO services (Altahir 2013). Figure 2 illustrates the context of the partnership guidelines (which the researchers call the 'realities') as the study's framework for assessing partnerships (Williams 2013). In this context, 'the realities' mean the reality of the status of each of these guidelines in practice in the donor-NGO relationships of each of the studied NGOs (see Figure 2).

This framework (Figure 2) is pertinent for this study because it is a starting point in ensuring that donor-NGO can have an equal voice in their partnership. The six guidelines (realities) in the framework are intended to support donors and NGOs in developing and implementing high-quality partnerships among themselves at field level and in line with best practices that nurture a culture of shared learning.

The results

Using the realities of 'Partnership' (Figure 2) in the HIV and AIDS non-governmental organisations in South Africa

Using the study's analytical framework (in Figure 2), the researcher seeks to: (1) identify the added value for both

the NGO and the donor (point 3 in Figure 2) by looking at the factors in the relationship that contribute to effective NGO work; (2) to assess organisational compatibility, the researcher looked at the NGO expectations of MoU demands set by the donors; and it was also essential to (3) assess the fundamental organisational capacity of the NGOs by looking at their internal collaborations, partnerships and other forms of working relationships. On point 4 in Figure 2, the researchers looked at the established working relationships by assessing the developed partnership agreements or project agreements on HIV and AIDS services or their agreement for capacity building. Such results set the scene for point 5 in Figure 2: implementing, monitoring and evaluating projects and partnerships as the NGOs engage and retain donors by strengthening donor-NGO relationships. (6) The final guideline and reality then becomes the development of a refined partnership agreement as the partners try to revisit their partnership agreement in their donor-NGO interactions in project selection decisions, planning and implementation.

The following subsections elaborate on the critical points of the framework (Figure 2).

Assessment of organisational compatibility of partnership

The researchers assessed the organisational compatibility of potential partnerships by looking at the NGO expectations through the MoUs, and what drove donor-NGO relationships. Contracts or MoUs were a valuable tool for specifying professional norms for the parties involved. However, they entrenched professional standards that undermined collaboration. 'We are vulnerable to the systemic weaknesses in accountability as our focus tends to drift maintaining the relationship with these many accountability mechanisms' (SD3, Accountant). Moreover, their contracts would disrupt preexisting organisational cultures:

'[T]here is this tendency by the donors to absorb our staff time in their contracts by the many mechanisms. I can tell you now that this is detrimental to the agreed programmatic outcomes.' (JB1, Accountant)

The participants were also worried that the MoUs disrupted network relationships as their donors would cancel their contracts for any trivial irregularity without proper investigations. The NGO participants also lamented that sometimes delivering services took longer than agreed upfront.

Non-governmental organisations expect that donors will accept this and provide some leeway so that they could deliver the services they promised to do to their beneficiaries or extend the times allowed for implementation.

Assessment of the fundamental capacity of the non-governmental organisations

Non-governmental organisation participants indicated that their organisations partnered and collaborated with other NGOs. This was to implement specific activities and projects

with limited time and funding. In this instance, an NGO would identify another NGO and form a partnership based on agreed objectives and other resources. In most instances, the association would come in mere agreements without any formal MoU. An NGO would develop some trust and confidence in the other and, on that basis, form a partnership either verbally or by written contract. As the NGOs got to know each other better, good working relationships and trust developed, leading to collaboration in implementing more programmes for extended periods. However, just like in other studies, some barriers affected donor-NGO collaborations: the multiple donors were barriers as more donors meant additional upward accountability requirements (Moloney 2019). 'It's hectic for our NGO because many donors demand too much accountability from us' (SD3, Accountant). Another barrier to NGO capacity was the different reporting formats required by the multiple donors:

'The process is very cumbersome [*laughing*]. Why have so many templates for different donors, yet we can only utilise one for all these donors? They are just creating work for us.' (SD3, Accountant)

The participants believed that, while they were required to report to different donors using the same indicators for the chain of donors who imposed various forms, this created a lot of work for the NGOs and impacted their capacity. 'Some donors want a lot of detail on their reporting templates, and we spend a lot of time writing' (WR5, Projects Manager).

Assessment of the developed partnership agreement, project agreement or donor-non-governmental organisation agreement in general

Non-governmental organisations are essential conduits of aid for their governments and donors. Most governments aid funnels through NGOs (Govender et al. 2020:7). 'Partnership' and 'partners' are terms that have risen to prominence and are linked directly with both bridge-building and capacity-building (Moloney 2019). When NGOs and donors collaborate, the emphasis is placed on planning to deliver quality programmes on services. In this case, partnerships were governed by signed contracts, as money was always involved. The contract conditions varied and tended to become more relaxed as time passed, trust developed and more resources were entrusted. The other positive outcomes for donor-NGO collaborations and relationships included a partnership with the donors, which meant that more funding could come to NGOs, thereby increasing the geographical coverage for service by those NGOs. This led to point 4 in Figure 2 of the framework, which incorporates the assessment of the developed partnership agreements or project agreement. 'Collaboration with the donors enables us to get notifications for projects on call by the donors. The donors also educate and give us technical assistance when we need it' (TS4, Project Manager). There were mutual benefits to forming a partnership agreement or project agreement. 'When donors trust you, even if there are closed calls, they can invite you to apply because of the delivery of previous projects,

which others are not privy to' (Accountant, SD3). Another Project Manager claimed that:

'When you are in collaboration, the conditions and restrictions from the Donor become relaxed on planning, the release of funds, monitoring, and reporting as trust and confidence grow in the relationship.' (TS4, Project Manager)

Donors would request that NGOs that wanted to work with them complete a capacity assessment to help them analyse a wide range of NGO capacities and prioritise areas for development:

'Even when donors were to build capacity in NGOs by putting employees through training or management courses, those employees who had been trained would eventually leave our NGOs for greener pastures. Once they are trained, those employees use their new skills somewhere they believe would better pay than the NGO that has capacitated them.' (JB1, Admin Officer)

This resulted in an ongoing low capacity among NGOs as capacitating employees who subsequently left their employment created a perennial problem for both NGOs and donors.

Implementation, monitoring and evaluation of donor engagement and partnerships

Non-governmental organisations strengthened their relationships with donors to enhance donor engagement and donor retention. The NGOs under consideration were aware of the conditions placed by donors. These were the conditions that would facilitate the full range of relationships that characterised successful partnerships as the following statement bears:

'As NGOs, we select or persuade those stakeholders (e.g. donors and beneficiaries) whose views align with our mission and values to establish legitimacy. Then we prioritize diversifying our funding sources to develop financial independence as a pathway to operational freedom.' (TS4, Projects Manager)

'We strategically chose to work with the donors for efficiency purposes by maintaining a dialogue with the donors while focusing on our long-term development objectives.' (JB1, Projects Manager)

It can be said that cooperative activity requires capacity, time to maintain relationships and resources to fund such activities (Harbour et al. 2021). Thus, the NGOs often lacked time and funding because engaging donors and developing long-term relations was a challenge because of the cumbersome donor requirements (Harbour et al. 2021). In some instances, the NGOs needed to have fewer more high-value donors and to retain relationships over the long term. The NGOs under study worked with the donors during the project implementation phase and actively engaged with donor feedback, leading to enhanced support by these donors even though donor efforts were not seeing sustained results on the part of NGOs. 'We sometimes failed to recognise our donors administrative requirements, especially if the donors did not follow up on us' (JC 2 Consultant-Grants).

Development of a new partnership agreement

The donors evaluated NGO projects using disclosure statements and business plans to select project-implementing partners. The NGO participants indicated that the donors involved them in the planning and implementation of projects. The donors and NGOs derived annual work plans and budgets, which they negotiated. If agreed, the donor would endorse them and pledge their contribution. At this stage, the whole process would be formalised into a contract specifying the contributions of both parties and performance expectations. The researcher studied the arrangements for the participating NGOs and found that they set that the funds would be released in installments. Non-governmental organisations would then submit quarterly progress reports to trigger the further release of funds. At year-end, a mutually agreed external auditor would examine the books of accounts and send copies of resultant reports to the donors. In some instances, donors would have their representatives inspect all the records and activities of the NGOs; and the donors also carried out mid-term external reviews and an end-of-project evaluation.

Donors also sent their representatives on monitoring tours to the project areas. These representatives would generate reports that would be combined with those of external auditors to give the donor a broader spectrum of views to develop a balanced opinion of the progress of the NGOs.

At each quarter and financial year's end, the NGO would submit the donor progress reports, including financial statements. This showed the progress of implementation, milestones attained, constraints encountered and tackled, utilisation of funding and, if necessary, a demand for additional funding.

From scrutinising the donor-NGO interaction reports, the researchers found that donors are more likely to provide core funding to NGOs with which donors have had a 'long-standing relationship'. Or there was good financial management governance, that is, the high level of trust.

For NGOs to perform their tasks, including accountability work, they require adequate funds. Given a global push to measure the results of donor and NGO interventions, this may lead donors to prioritise long-term programmes with positive results and overlook any learning from why failure occurred, whether improvements are possible and how both NGOs and donors can become better partners (Harbour et al. 2021).

Discussion

This study sought to understand 'Donor-NGO partnerships through the five South African NGOs' experience of managing their accountability relationships with the donors. The findings add to the understanding of partnerships and accountability relationships between donors and NGOs.

The researchers outlined (under section 'Implementation, monitoring and evaluation of donor engagement and partnerships') the role of donors and NGOs in encouraging partnership, so there is a tradeoff between time – to undertake the work – and the number of donors you have partnerships with, because of the cumbersome reporting requirements. The research also outlined the tensions present in responding to donors' accountability requirements and delivering services to beneficiaries. Such background helped us understand NGO desires for partnership, which added value for the two parties. Relationships are multidimensional, and although relationships between donors and NGOs are increasingly described as 'partnerships', accountability mechanisms do not necessitate relationship equality (Mpofu 2019). The aspects of dependency by the NGOs on donors have resulted in some NGOs shifting their focus from essential areas for their beneficiaries towards areas of donor interest that will attract a large amount of funding (Mpofu 2019). This relationship has not only 'worsened' and pushed NGOs' involvement towards the donor agendas but also rendered partnership rhetoric (Menashy 2018).

The study has shown that accountability relationships are convoluted, with NGOs reliant on financial support from donors, supporters or the government. Accountability relationships within the donor–NGO–beneficiary nexus are diffuse, and a remote donor's oversight of local NGOs is weak. This created space for donors to overlook or deemphasise partnership as they were not bound to do anything they did not want to, given that donor coordination difficulties present barriers of multiple donors and aid fragmentation across NGOs, within individual donors and across donors (Moloney 2019). Researchers, Uddin and Belal (2019), support the argument that beneficiaries lack the power to hold NGOs to account. The expectation is that influential stakeholders, such as donors, would enable NGOs to be accountable to their beneficiaries, as Harbour et al. (2021) posits, donor and NGO collaborations should recognise failure as a chance to inform a learning strategy, rather than a threat to donor reputation. Accountability mechanisms, such as annual project reports and financial records, are used by donors to keep track of NGO spending and to leverage funds by publicising their projects and programmes. However, donors enforce their requirements by attaching excessive conditionalities or onerous reporting requirements to their funding, jeopardising their relationships with the NGOs (Mpofu 2019). Other researchers have also questioned this partnership as they claim that the accountability mechanisms do not promote partnership relationships (Burger & Owens 2010; OHCHR & CESR 2013). The findings point to NGOs being mere subcontractors, uninvolved in local or national politics, and simple implementers of donor objectives. Day (2016) supports the assertion when he says that – donors can question the primary goals of NGOs and even discuss results-focused efforts without discussion of implementation. This is also highlighted by Mpofu (2019)'s study, where she established that impact is a donor-driven agenda incompatible with the 'people-centred approaches to "development" joined with the NGOs'. Non-governmental organisations may be

pressured to focus on donor demands and less upon local community urgencies (Mpofu 2019). Delinking from their grassroots may increase NGOs' likelihood of becoming donor dependent. The five NGOs focused on measurable outcomes at the order of donors within short and prespecified timeframes that became nonreflective of longer-term and flexible NGO objectives.

In this study, the NGOs highlighted the donor's conflicting strategic interests and related coordination problems, including donor delegation of labour to NGOs and donor failure to coordinate aid. Similar studies have also reported donor preference for short-term work as the donors tend to fund those NGOs that are likely to be successful, thereby ignoring other NGOs (Lawson 2013:15–20). The donor purse and its interests are prioritised over NGO concerns. A donor's financial interaction with the NGO and the terms attached to funding (e.g. not paying for overhead costs or specific salaries) influence implementation outcomes. Add-on the difficulty of managing once-off or non-renewable contracts, and the NGO's organisational challenge heightens. Of the few studies evaluating NGO relations with donors, funding certainly increased NGO autonomy from the donor (Elbers & Arts 2011; Ismail 2019; OECD 2003). This study has provided an overview of donor–NGO relationships. Although these five cases represent different NGO involvement in the HIV and AIDS health sector, they cannot be considered representative of the range of such partnerships or best practices. Nonetheless, they offer a window into the world of HIV and AIDS-donor partnerships throughout the country, and by extension in the health sectors of donors and NGOs that are working to improve community health, reduce disparities, promote equity and strengthen the health system.

Conclusion and directions for future research

The vital issue afflicting donor–NGO partnerships is that the nature of the relationship is not what partnerships should mean, as the NGOs are reluctant and complain of cumbersome accountability mechanisms. The administrative burden of accountability mechanisms detracted time and resources from NGOs' primary work of providing services and from developing equitable accountability mechanisms with the beneficiaries of their projects. Therefore, this limited the capacities of the 'NGOs' to build further community-level or focused interventions and close relations with beneficiaries to address what they say they need concerning HIV services (access to services and good quality of benefits).

The study has some practical implications for research. It particularises the literature's long-standing concerns about the complexities associated with accountability mechanisms and the NGO landscape. It is crucial that the three significant stakeholders (donors, NGOs and beneficiaries) need to be involved in all interaction and communication stages. As a first step, it is critical to establish the power distribution and power relationship among the interest groups.

Non-governmental organisations operate in a competitive space, but they can collaborate with other NGOs when interests are aligned. Collaboration should be encouraged to view the potential benefits of sharing skills, devising common approaches to confronting challenges and adopting standard sectoral practices for community-focused health service strategies. Donor–NGO accountability mechanisms should be designed to facilitate this.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

This manuscript was adapted from the doctoral thesis submitted by L.M. for Doctor of Philosophy at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. K.G. served as the supervisor of the study. Both authors prepared the first draft for publication and worked on the final draft.

Funding information

The authors would like to acknowledge and thank the following funders: SIDA – for sponsoring the PhD Programme, Health Economics and HIV and AIDS Research Division (HEARD), the University of KwaZulu-Natal and its Research Committee for approving the PhD research.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study can be made available by the corresponding author, L.M., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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